

Catalyzing Local Action toward Sustainable Community Development in Harmony with Coral Reefs

Masahito Kamimura

Director, WWF Coral Reef Conservation and Research Centre

Abstract

In this presentation, we provide outlines of the project to develop sustainable local community in Shiraho, Ishigaki Island, Okinawa prefecture operated by WWF Japan, and discuss how we, as a branch of international conservation organization, have been able to catalyze local actions toward sustainable community development in harmony with coral reef environment.

WWF is one of the world's largest leading conservation organizations, operating in more than 100 countries and supported by 5 million supporters globally.

Okinawa islands were selected as one of the Global 200 sites, that is the list of priorities for conservation by WWF.

WWF Coral Reef Conservation and Research Centre is located in the Shiraho Village in Ishigaki Island, Okinawa, where WWF Japan has been actively working for conservation of the coral lagoon in front of the village. This facility was built in April 2000. Since then, with the Shiraho villagers, the WWF Coral Reef Centre has been promoting Shiraho project for conservation and sustainable use of the coral lagoon and its marine resources.

The ultimate goal of Shiraho project is to create a model of SATOUMI system in which local community establishes community-based environmental conservation and sustainable resource management systems to build capacity of sustainable self-governance of the community and marine environment.

Shiraho Coral Reefs stretch about 12km north and south along the east coast of Ishigaki Island. Shiraho Coral Reefs has a large reef pool extending 1 km from the shore at the maximum surrounded by reef edges and a drop off, the typical structure of shore reef. This reef pool harbors a rich nature with the world-largest blue coral colony, which is the well-known target of various scientific research. About 1,600 people live in Shiraho Village in proximity to the coral reefs, and human lives have been deeply connected to the reefs. Shiraho Village has a long history with strong ties among local residents, and it still cherishes traditional religious events and festivals mostly organized by Shiraho Community Center, the local body of self-governance and decision making.

The coral reef provided people with food resources even in the hard times such

as wartime and poor harvests because of its magical power. Local people called it the “treasure sea” or “life-supporting sea”. The coral reefs were not simply a source of food, but their stony skeletons were used for walls and pillars, stepping stones, well walls, and plaster to fix roof tiles. The coral reef also affected people’s culture and mentality. They sang a song and danced, and are still doing so referring to fishing in the east sea (Shiraho Coral Reefs) in the “Honensai”, the largest and most important traditional agricultural festival of the village.

We found that the traditional lifestyle was called “coral reef culture” among Shiraho people. Old people in this village says vegetables and rice are gifts of the coral reef. Soils of the farmlands in Shiraho are made from elevated and weathered coral rocks called *Shimajiri Maji*.

Local people have created the coral reef culture by utilizing the rich nature. After the reintegration of the Okinawa islands to Japanese main land, the condition of the coral reefs has been worsening because of human activities. Red soil runoffs from the land areas have been the most significant cause of deaths and reduction of corals.

WWF is interested in coral reef conservation, but the community that lives alongside the coral reef must make a living. From this context, we believe that there is a way to integrate coral reef conservation, livelihood improvement, and inheriting cultural traditions to make sustainable human and coral communities.

A diverse group of local villagers gathered together to establish “Shiraho Conservation Council for Bountiful Seas (SCCBS)” in 2005. The council has been working for coral reef conservation and wise use with the support of WWF Japan. SCCBS made a rule of the tourism activities in the coral reef and restored a traditional stone tidal weir. It also started working on preventive measures against red soil runoffs from farmlands for coral reef conservation.

WWF japan and SCCBS had jointly supported these coral reef conservation activities to be more sustainable by establishing a NPO with a full-time staff. The A NPO Natsu-pana had finally been established in May 2013.

Natsu-Pana is a NPO composed of like-minded residents of Shiraho-Village. It aims to integrate functions of diverse community organizations in Shiraho village including Shiraho Community Charter Promotion Committee, Shiraho Conservation Council for Bountiful Seas and Shiraho Sunday Market, all of which WWF has provided support for their launching and operation. It also recruited a full-time employee to coordinate NPO management and community development actions, thereby creating employments for young villagers and activating community development. Profit-making

business is absolutely needed to secure the sustainability of NPO and the employment. Natsu-Pana endeavor to develop green tourism and eco-tourism programs utilizing local resources of the Shiraho village. The benefit obtained from these operations could be allocated to conservation of local nature including coral reefs and inheritance of local culture. Of course, Shiraho Sunday Market aiming to develop and market local signature products is the core activities of profit-making for Natsu-Pana.

Shiraho villagers sincerely hope that Shiraho community will maintain its sustainability for future. Many conservation and wise use actions, including ecotourism among notable actions, are being promoted by Shiraho people by themselves. We, as a member of the Shiraho community, hope that environmentally sustainable local businesses will contribute to community based conservation of valuable coral reefs.